BACKGROUND-

Ash and Birchbark: The As and Bs of Traditional Baskets

Wabanaki people today are famous as basketmakers, carvers and canoe makers. As in the past, their arts and traditional crafts are made from the natural resources of their homeland. Brown ash, birchbark, sweet grass, spruce root and porcupine quills are used to create objects that are both utilitarian and beautiful, and that reflect the interaction of tradition and individual expression.

BIRCHBARK BASKETS

When Europeans arrived in Maine, Native people were using a wide variety of birchbark containers. John Josselyn, an Englishman who made two voyages to Maine in the mid-1600s, reported:

> Delicate sweet dishes too they made of Birch-bark sowed with threads drawn from Spruse or Cedar-roots, and garnished on the outside with flourisht works, and on the brims with glistening quills taken from the Porcupine...these they made of all sizes from a dram cup to a dish containing a pottle, likewise Buckets to carry water or the like, large Boxes too of the same materials...wrought very smooth and neatly.

Birchbark is a versatile material, put to many uses. It is waterproof, rot-resistant, and flexible, which makes it an ideal material for everything from dishes and baskets to wigwams and canoes. Most items made from birchbark have the dark inner bark on the outside. This provides a surface for decoration by etching, the process of scraping away the dark inner bark to reveal the light layers underneath – the "flourisht works" described by Josselyn. Early birchbark baskets were usually decorated with the traditional Wabanaki "double curve" motif.

ASH SPLINT BASKETS

Splint baskets are made from brown ash, *Fraxinus niger*, a tree of moist woodlands and wetlands. Ash is so important to the Wabanaki that a Passamaquoddy legend collected from an elderly woman in the 1800s by scholar Charles Leland cites the ash tree as the origin of all Wabanaki people:

> Glooskap came first of all into this country...into the land of the Wabanaki, next to the sunrise. There were no Indians here then...And in this way he made Man: He took his bow and arrows and shot at trees, the basket-trees, the Ash. Then Indians came out of the bark of the Ash-trees.

A good "basket log" is a straight section of ash trunk 5-12 feet long and six inches in diameter. Once the log has been cut, it is pounded along its length with the back of an axe or a sledge. This causes layers of the wood to split along the annual growth rings, and splints can be peeled off.

The rough splints are then split further, either by hand with a knife or with a specially made "splitter," and then smoothed with a splint plane or a knife. The splints are then cut to size with a gauge, a tool that consists of a series of evenly spaced metal blades set in a wooden handle. Ash splint baskets are plaited in a "checkerboard" weave where the horizontal weft (weaver) moves over and under the vertical warp (standard) in a regular pattern to make the basket. They are finished with the addition of rims and sometimes handles, depending on the intended function.

At some point, Native people began to weave sturdy work baskets of ash for their own use and for sale. By the early 1800s, basketmakers peddled hat boxes, trays, bowls, pack baskets and harvest baskets door-to-door in growing towns throughout Maine. With the influx of settlers and industries such as logging, Native people lost control of their self-determination and land. Basketmaking, woods work and guiding were means to make a living in an increasingly difficult world.

Some Maine industries used these Wabanaki work baskets in quantity, particularly the potato industry in Aroostook County which used baskets in the harvest, and the fish processing industry in areas like Eastport which used Passamaquoddy "fish scale" baskets. These were used to collect fish scales, a byproduct of fish processing used in cosmetics. Their sturdy bottoms held the weight of wet fish scales while the more loosely woven sides allowed the water to run out.

After the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution brought new-found wealth to the nation. Tourism flourished and led to the development of summer resorts such as Bar Harbor, Poland Springs and Old Orchard Beach in Maine, the White Mountains in New Hampshire and Campobello Island in Canada. Wabanaki basketmakers found an eager and concentrated market for their wares. This market to some extent replaced the old pattern of itinerant selling. Families of basketmakers would travel to resort areas for the summer, bringing the supply of baskets they had made over the winter plus raw materials to make baskets in their summer homes. Other Wabanaki sold baskets from their homes or from shops near the main roads, and some continued to sell door-to-door.

By the late 1800s, these resort areas and Victorian tastes created a demand for "fancy baskets," which were smaller and more ornately decorated than the older work baskets. New tools also facilitated the development of this type of basketry – gauges, mentioned above, allowed basketmakers to cut small and regular splints, and the use of molds, called "blocks," made shaping the baskets easier. Blocks could be used in various ways, and baskets made on the same block could be very different, varying in height, surface decoration and use. Most fancy baskets incorporated sweet grass, *Hierochloe odorata*, either combed or braided, and used various decorative weaves. These weaves involved laying a second weaver over the first and twisting it into decorative shapes with names like "porcupine," "curly" or "ribbon" weave. In the 1930s, sweet grass was sometimes replaced by manufactured paper twine known as "Hong Kong cord," in an attempt at efficiency and economy, but it was never as popular as sweet grass. These baskets were also frequently brightly colored. Originally, dyes were made from native materials – brown from alder bark, yellow from golden thread root, red from Solomon's seal – although even from very early days, imported indigo was used for blue. By the late 1800s vivid aniline dyes were widely used.

The inventiveness and creativity of Wabanaki basketmakers is reflected in the huge variety of forms. Baskets were made to hold handkerchiefs, gloves, celluloid collars, buttons, stationery, calling cards, hat pins, sewing supplies and more. Wall pockets, sometimes two or three tiered, held mail and miscellaneous papers. There were jewelry baskets, yarn holders, shoppers, purses and napkin rings, all made out of ash and sweet grass. Some baskets were purely decorative, like basketry tea cups, and baskets shaped like ears of corn or strawberries.

TOMAH JOSEPH

The Passamquoddy artist Tomas Joseph was an inheritor of the tradition of birchbark basketry. Only the bare outlines of his life are known. He was born in 1837 into a world that was rapidly changing for his people. Non-Native incursions into tribal lands were making traditional ways hard to maintain. By the time Tomah Joseph was an adult, it was probably almost impossible to make a living following the traditional patterns of hunting, fishing and gathering. During his lifetime, a political split at the Pleasant Point reservation in Eastport led to the establishment of a second Passamaquoddy reservation at Peter Dana Point in Princeton. Tomah Joseph served at least one term as governor of Peter Dana Point. We know that he was married to Hanna Lewey, and that they had a son, Sabattis. Tomah Joseph died of pneumonia when he was seventy-seven after sleeping outside on the frozen ground. Many of his descendants still live at Peter Dana Point and Pleasant Point.

During his lifetime, Tomah Joseph made a living as a canoe guide and by making and selling incised birchbark objects. His main market was on Campobello Island, then a popular spot for "summer people," including the Roosevelt family. Each summer, Tomah Joseph would paddle to Campobello and camp, hiring out as a guide and selling his wares. Before Tomah Joseph, most of the decoration on these types of containers was floral or geometric, using the traditional double-curve motif. Tomah Joseph retained these traditional elements, but reduced them primarily to border designs and added pictures of animals, scenes from daily life, and illustrations from Passamaquoddy legends.

His use of Passamaquoddy stories may well have developed from his work with Charles Leland, a scholar who collected Maine Indian legends. Leland published *The Algonquin Legends of New England* in 1884. The first person listed in his acknowledgments is "Tomah Joseph, Passamaquoddy, Indian Governor at Peter Dana's Point, Maine." As well as being one of Leland's primary sources for legends, Tomah Joseph illustrated the volume with a series of etchings on birchbark. He would reuse these images in later works.

A second common theme in Tomah Joseph's work is pictures of everyday life. The activities he shows – hunting with bow and arrow, fishing, cooking over a fire, portaging and paddling canoes while hunting deer – were from a way of life already passing. He also recorded contemporary scenes, Indians paddling "summer people" in canoes or acting as fishing guides.

Finally, Tomah Joseph decorated his birchbark with pictures of animals. He was a master at catching the essence of an animal with a few well-drawn lines. An owl, sometimes labeled

"Ko-ko-gus," frequently appears. It is probably either a barred owl or a snowy owl and may have been Tomah Joseph's personal mark, or his totem.

Tomah Joseph also used words in his etched birchbark work. He sometimes labeled the characters in the legends he illustrated. In his earlier work, he also used the Passamaquoddy phrases, "Kolele mooke," translated as "you have good luck," and "Mikwid hamin," or "recall me in your mind."

As well as introducing new artistic elements into birchbark work, Tomah Joseph used new forms. He knew and made traditional birchbark objects like canoes and mocucks (buckets), but he also turned birchbark into items made to appeal to the Victorian tourist trade – collar boxes, log holders, waste baskets, picture frames, glove boxes, and more.

Tomah Joseph's life was deeply rooted in traditional Passamaquoddy culture. Drawing from that strength, he adapted his skills and knowledge to changing economic conditions, and produced a remarkable body of work.

BASKETMAKERS TODAY

In the 1930s, the hard economic times that hit the rest of the nation were particularly difficult for Maine Native people, and the market for baskets began to disappear. Many of the industrial baskets were replaced by imported or plastic substitutes. By the early 1990s, there were probably fewer than a dozen Wabanaki basketmakers under the age of 50. In an effort to preserve the art and traditions of Wabanaki basketry, the Maine Arts Commission Traditional Arts Apprenticeship program began working with Wabanaki people to provide opportunities for young basketmakers to work and learn with master craftspeople. In 1992, the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance was founded. It has three basic aims – to encourage younger tribal members to become basketmakers, to actively promote and market Maine Indian baskets, and to ensure basketmakers access to supplies of raw materials. These two organizations have been an important part of the current revival in Maine Indian basketry.

In 1994, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded Passamaquoddy basketmaker Mary Gabriel a National Heritage fellowship for her work, and in 2002, fellow Passamaquoddy basketmaker Clara Neptune Keezer received the same honor. In recent years, other Wabanaki basketmakers have also received state and national recognition of their artistic achievements.

Artists today still work from their homes, creating limited numbers of high quality baskets for sale. Like many artists working in other media, basketmakers often have other sources of employment. Basketmaking is now widely recognized as an important traditional art form with deep cultural roots. At the same time, individual artists are exploring new forms and decorative styles, bringing a traditional craft into the present. Basketmaking continues to be an important economic enterprise, and a source of cultural identity and pride for the Wabanaki people.

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